

## FEATURE

Images courtesy  
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Robert Klein  
Gallery/Boston

# IDEAS OF WOMANHOOD

Lebanese-American photographer **Rania Matar** explores female adolescence and notions of womanhood and the underlying universality of these experiences. Donatella Montrone reports.

**W**estern discussions centring on women and girls in the Middle East rarely recognise the rich diversity of lifestyles experienced by women in the 17 countries that comprise the region; instead, they feed a singular narrative driven by a preconceived notion – that all women in the Middle East are oppressed and denied basic human rights. Likewise, visual representations through a Western gaze often ascribe the same myopic treatment, focusing on the hijab or niqab as evidence of patriarchy, inequality and misogyny. Lebanese-American photographer Rania Matar points out that all nuance is lost in such narrow explorations, which fail to recognise that the status of women varies greatly across this multi-ethnic, transcontinental region of more than 410 million inhabitants.

Matar has been making work on female representation ever since she immersed herself in photography after the birth of her children, focusing on the human spirit – that which unites rather than divides us. What started as an intimate documentation of her family, and by extension her sense of self in a cross-cultural household, gradually evolved into an ever-expanding oeuvre centred on female identity in both Western and Arab worlds.

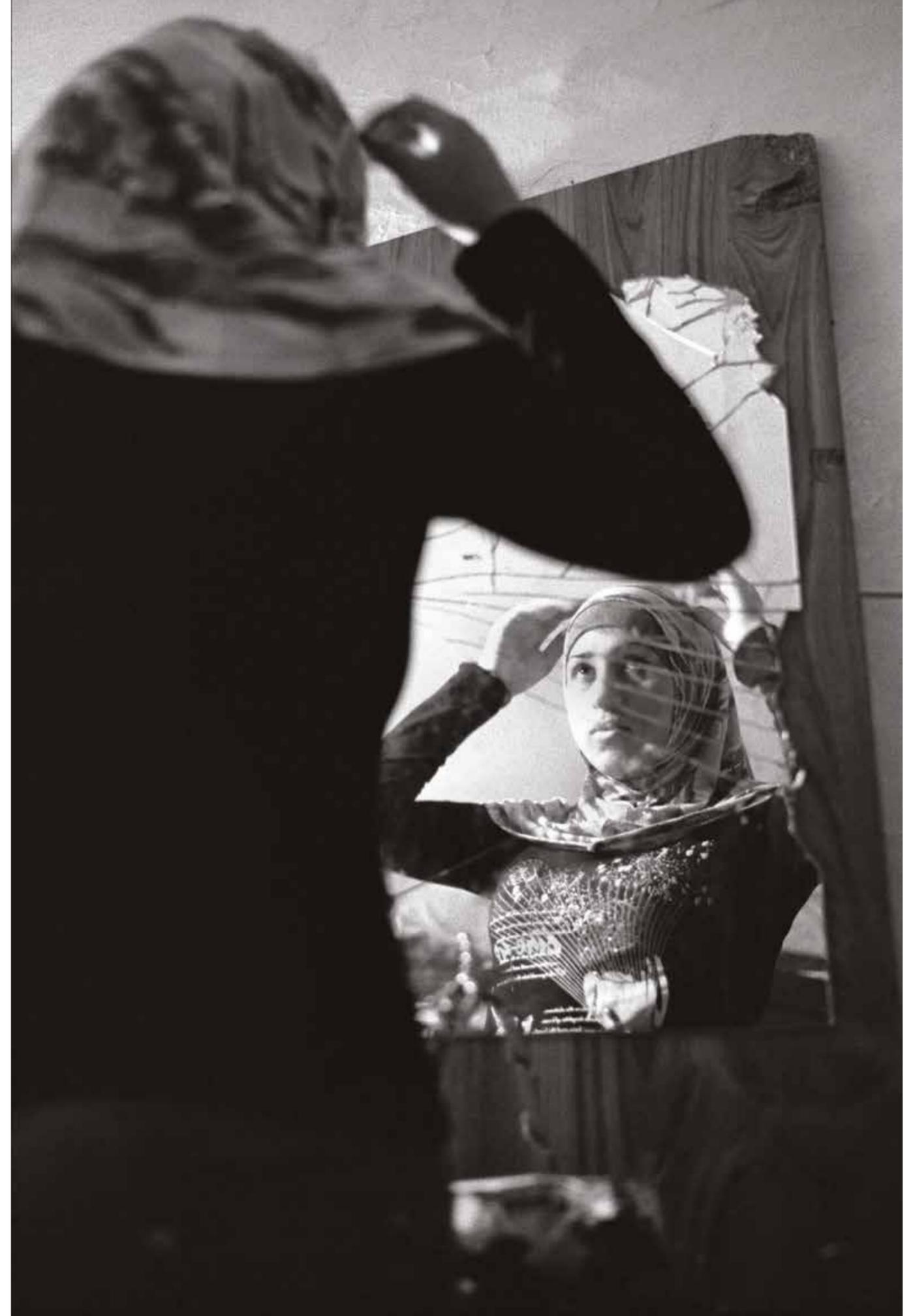
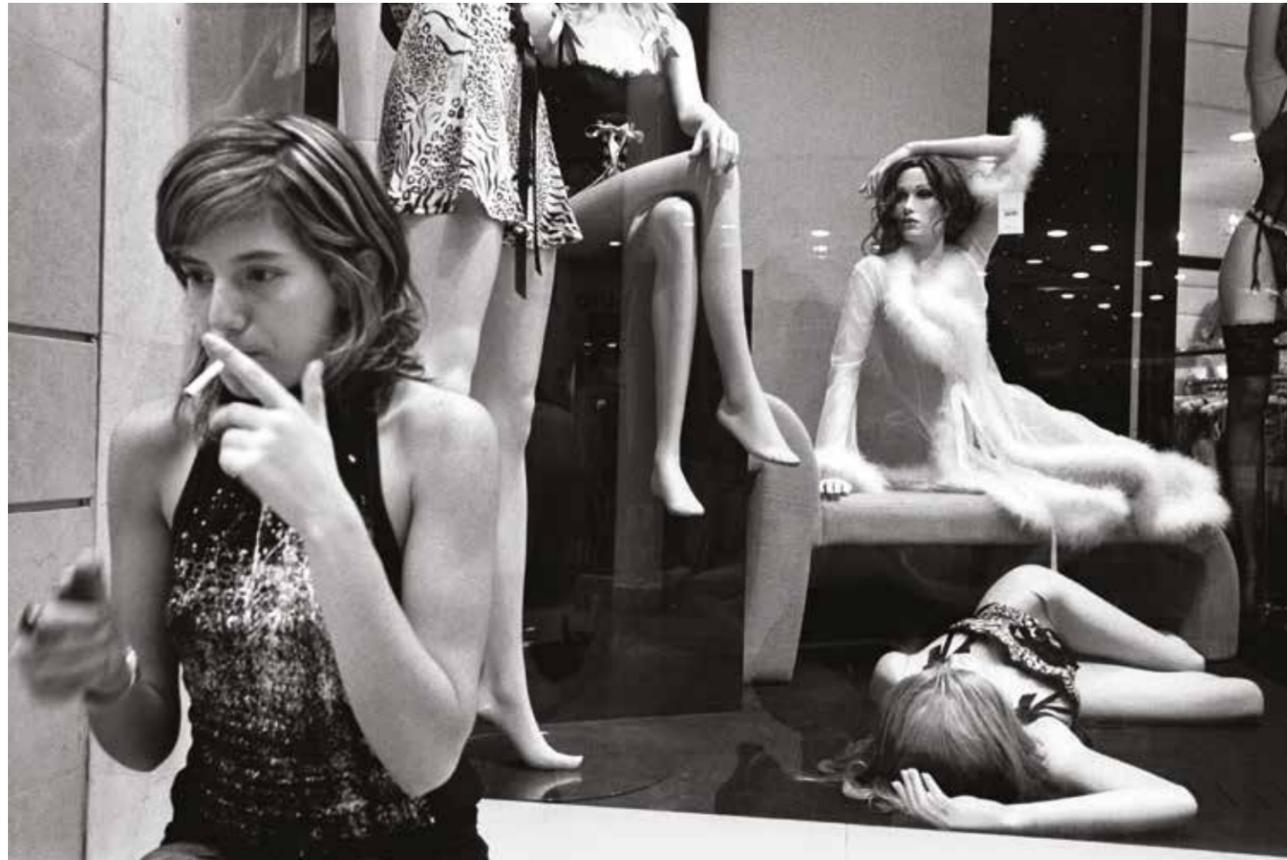
Her studies eclipse cultural boundaries and touch upon the universality of issues that women confront throughout their lives – the struggles of puberty, an acute awareness of physical presence, their relationship with their bodies, their mothers, each other. From *Unspoken Conversations*, a colour series started in 2014, which examines the bonds between mothers and daughters, to *L'Enfant-Femme*, an earlier work that explores an adolescent girl's sense of identity as her body changes, Matar takes notions of sisterhood as her source of inspiration. >

A woman stands on a ledge, surveying the destruction in her heavily bombed village, Aita El Chaab, southern Lebanon.





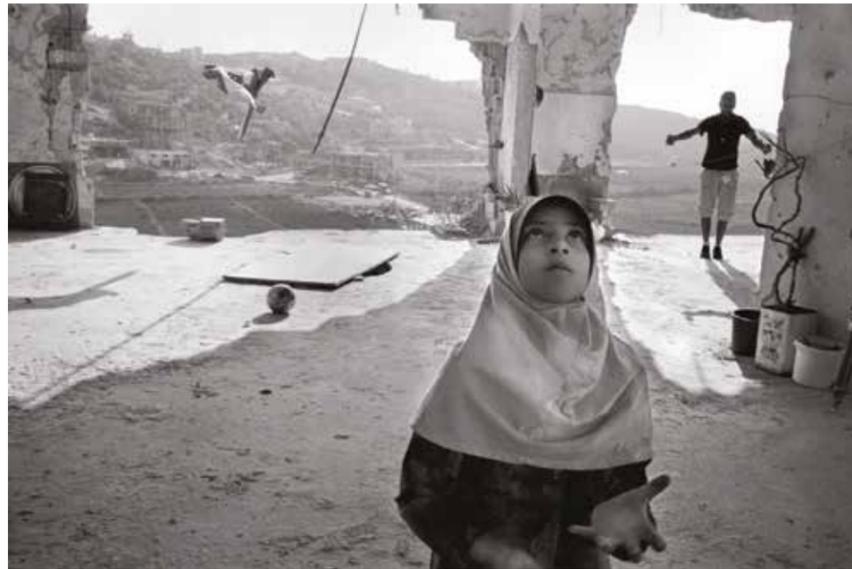
Above Two women have coffee at Starbucks, Beirut. Below Cigarettes and mannequins, Beirut. Opposite Broken Mirror #2, Beirut.





◀ Her series *Ordinary Lives*, made over a number of years travelling back to her birthplace in Lebanon, explores not only womanhood against the backdrop of a country ravaged by civil war, but also documents the harmonious relationship

between women and the space they occupy, in a country finding its voice in the Middle East. 'Lebanon provides a microcosm of what is going on in the world today, reflecting both the growing differences and the existing interdependencies between the West and the



Arab world, between Christianity and Islam,' writes Matar in the introduction to her monogram. 'While a large segment of the population is Western-oriented in its outlook, lifestyle and education, a growing segment, mostly Muslim, has its sights pointed eastward towards the rest of the Muslim world. In Lebanon, these two apparent opposites coexist, and their lives are intertwined on a daily basis, providing different interpretations of female beauty and fashion, and a juxtaposition of the veil and Islamic traditions with a Western dress code and lifestyle.' ▶

Above Children in Aita El Chaab, southern Lebanon.  
Left A young girl learns to juggle while the man in the background skips rope, Aita El Chaab, southern Lebanon.  
Top right Reading newspapers, Beirut.  
Bottom right Three Greek Orthodox nuns attend mass during prayer for Eid El Rab (Celebration of the Father), Beirut.

*'Seemingly mundane acts – a child playing, a mother nursing a baby, a pious woman in quiet contemplation – testify to the universality of humanity.'*







Matar's own Western influences invariably meld, and often collide, with the traditions and social mores of her homeland, and it is this duality that informs her work. In *Ordinary Lives*, she explores notions of modesty and devotion to faith, alongside fashion and female liberation. Hers is a cross-cultural perspective – that of a woman who straddles two worlds, where East meets West.

'When I was growing up in Lebanon in the 1970s, very few women wore the hijab or veil. Over the years, however, many Muslim women and girls have embraced it for different reasons. It has different undertones – from religious devotion, to self-assertion vis-à-vis the West, to a fashion accessory.' Now a mother of four and working as an associate professor of photography at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Matar brings a deeply personal perspective to her representation of women and girls.

She tells stories through photography, lingering on moments of shared humanity, where the intimacy of motherhood, the bonds of womanhood and the guile of adolescence transcend borders. In *Ordinary Lives* she captures moments of comfort in dissolute surroundings – a young girl in a

hijab juggling in a shelled-out ruin while, in the distance, a man skips rope; a mother nursing an infant in Bourj El Shemali, one of the largest and poorest refugee camps in Lebanon and home to tens of thousands of displaced Palestinians; a nun at the Convent of Saydat al Nouriyeh gazing out over the horizon, her religious garments billowing in the wind. These seemingly mundane acts – a child playing, a mother nursing a baby, a pious woman in quiet contemplation – testify to the universality of humanity.

Pulitzer Prize-winning foreign correspondent Anthony Shadid contributes an essay to *Ordinary Lives* and writes that a powerful narrative unfolds in Matar's photographs, one in which she treats the evidence of conflict as a backdrop. Her narrative is about life – 'its resilience, its endurance, its courage – the most human of stories,' he writes. 'Humanity is the terrain which Matar understands,' he adds, describing her photographs as feminine and graceful. 'She gives voice to women and children... There is a tranquillity to these images.'

Matar trained as an architect before turning her aesthetic judgment to photography, a discipline she brings to every frame, in which she contrasts light and texture to dramatic effect. 'I made *Ordinary Lives* with a Leica M6 and M7,

using 28mm and 35mm wide-angle lenses. All the tonality and contours were achieved with natural light; the negatives printed on archival warm-tone fibre paper lending itself to rich compositions.'

Ultimately, Matar shows us a Lebanon that embraces individual expressions of womanhood and captures not only the essence of a homeland in flux, but also the different facets of its complex, resilient and formidable sisterhood.

*Rania Matar is a Guggenheim 2018 Fellow, the recipient of a Mellon Foundation artist-in-residency grant at the Gund Gallery and one of the Top 100 Distinguished Women Photographers chosen by Women in Photography. Her work has been exhibited internationally, including at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Carnegie Museum of Art, and the National Museum of Women in the Arts, among others. Ordinary Lives, published in 2009, is available at all fine booksellers and online. To see more of Matar's work, go to [raniematar.com](http://raniematar.com).*

Page 14 A mother nurses her baby in Bourj El Shemali refugee camp, Tyre. Above A nun at the Convent of Saydat al Nouriyeh, Chekka.